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Leadership Competency Series

Aggressive Realism - the mark of success

Aggressive realism means displaying determination and energetic pursuit to succeed every time, initiated by a strong desire of achievement orientation, writes M R Chandramowly.

Over the years behavioural scientists have observed that some people have an intense need to achieve. The need for achievement is a distinct human factor - observed a young psychologist. He got his doctorate in psychology at Yale in 1941 and became a professor at Wesleyan University.

At Harvard he and his associates studied particularly this 'urge to achieve.' He is David Clarence McClelland (1917-98) whose research led him to believe that the need for achievement is a distinct human motive that can be isolated and assessed in any group.

Based on his experiments (throwing rings over a peg from any distance a participant chooses) he proved that the 'Achievers' normally have a higher need to succeed and they carefully measure their steps to get a sense of mastery - not too close to make a task ridiculously easy or too far away to make it impossible.

McClelland maintains that achievement oriented people are not gamblers to choose the big risk to get a result which is beyond their power. Gamblers easily rationalise away their personal responsibility if they lose. Achievement oriented people take the middle ground, preferring a moderate degree of risk because they feel that their efforts and abilities will probably influence the outcome. In the process they discover the path of aggressive realism.

Chance vs choice

Achievement oriented people do not believe in winning by chance. They choose and put effort designing a process for achievement rather than leaving it to destiny or luck. Achievement, in a primary level, is about accomplishing a task.

At a higher level it is the degree of impact and influence of a leader on other people to achieve. In business, this aggressive realism is the mark of the successful entrepreneur. Another characteristic of achievement-oriented people is that they seem to be more concerned with personal achievement than the rewards.

Dexterity in action

This finding of McClelland is not different from the eastern wisdom of Karma Yoga - the dexterity in action. The beauty of this theory is that the finest degree of quality in action can be achieved only when one doesn't focus on result, while the result for finest work done is reserved and cannot be taken away. When a person surrenders to any thing that is higher, the personal ego of 'I am doing it' takes a back

seat, and with the reward attention gone, achievement focus takes charge to drive towards success.
Why do achievement oriented people behave as they do? McClelland claims it is because they habitually spend time thinking about doing things better. Students with a high need for achievement will generally get better grades than equally bright students with weaker achievement needs.
Achievement oriented people tend to claim up their career ladders and get promoted faster because they are constantly trying to think about better ways of doing things. Organisations, with many such people grow faster and are more profitable.

Achievers

At an individual level, achievers are aggressive in reality limits and with their high need to achieve, they move ahead, produce and get things done. However, as managers their success depends on results produced by others.
Achievers, as they are highly result oriented, tend to expect others to do the same. As a result, they sometimes lack the human skills to understand limitations of their own team members and cause frustration among people with their over-emphasis on achievements.
It will be great to follow the teaching of a master but it is very difficult to work under him. There are many instances to illustrate. It was very hard to work under leaders like Gandhi. His own wife had to suffer a great deal to live upto the expectations of Mahatma. Achiever as Managers normally tend to be a taskmasters.

McClelland also observes, while achievement oriented people are needed in organisations; they do not always make the best managers unless they develop their human skills. Being a good producer is not sufficient to make an effective manager (Ref Ack: 'McClelland's research into achievement motivation: Accel-Team.com)

Assessing yourself

Achievement Orientation is a concern for working to surpass a standard of excellence and managing internal and external resources to achieve goals. How do organisations that are seeking to recruit achievers spot this competency in a candidate?

If you are hired for a job, which predominantly needs an achievement orientation, here is a self-assessment to reflect on your answers to these multi-dimensional questions.

Reflecting on the Past: Do you enjoy working on difficult projects? If so share with us one of the significant experiences. Have you ever accomplished something you did not think you could? Tell me about a time when you went beyond the call of duty. What are some of your accomplishments of which you are most proud of? What are some examples of some important decisions you have made recently? What has been your greatest accomplishment and greatest disappointment? What is the most stimulating thing you are looking for in a job?

Revealing reality

Your answer to these types of questions reveals the reality. If you are achievement oriented person, your past accomplishments would speak out what you have achieved something significant. The interviewer now presents a business case. It may involve some decision-making and operational risk.

Focus on future

'Describe a significant risk you would like to take in this situation to move ahead'. Why do you suggest taking that risk? What are such risks you have undertaken recently?

Response to such questions brings out how good you learn from the past using the achievement competency and also apply your learning to face the future. At this stage, the interviewer would have seen what you had done in the past and also your ability to achieve things in the present and the future. But, he would now like to know whether you are willing to achieve. It is known that 'Skill and Will' are inseparable for achievers. Are you motivated to achieve? What makes you to push gently and execute things? What is the 'starter' that switches you to move on? How do you look at the competition while you desire to succeed? What do you get after completing difficult tasks? What has your last employer done that motivated you to work harder? What kinds of responsibilities are important to you in your work? While responses to the oppugn exhibits what drives a person to achieve, an experienced interviewer would now move on to the central area which drives the competency of achievement orientation, the sense of self. Describe a situation in which you are most successful. Describe what success means to you. How would you describe your standards of performance? How would you evaluate your success and to what do you attribute your success? What is your definition for 'success' and 'failure'?

Characteristics

Accordingly McClelland's research, people who possess and display the competency of 'Achievement orientation' have certain characteristics in common. They set reasonably high, stretched and achievable goals. They look out for personal achievement rather than the rewards of success. They desire for job relevant feedback (how well am I doing?) rather than attitudinal feedback ('how well do you like me')

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